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The Ability to Converse Compassionately: About the Relevance of Non-Confrontational Approaches in Civil-Political Discussions

On the emblem of today's conference there are two fleshy figures who try to sew up with a strong thread a ball (probably the earth) which has split. Unfortunately, as long as we are taking care of one of these splits, nearby there appears another one, perhaps even more awful. At least, that is the way that it seems to me, and I suspect, that my experience is not unique. I grew up in a Russian-speaking family and at the same time studied in a rather fine, for Soviet times, Ukrainian school in Kyiv; it is from then – not from rumors – that I know what a positive human potential was embedded in the mutual openness and mutual collaboration of Ukrainian and Russian cultures.

Therefore, that which is happening today seems all the worse and it hurts one more deeply. The well-known words of Heinrich Heine about the fact that when the world splits, the rift goes through the human heart (of a poet or a non-poet, or anyone else, in the given case, it is absolutely irrelevant who it is), always struck me as too beautiful; now I comprehend their severe veracity. I am sure that something similar, maybe in other words, could be said by millions, without exaggeration, of our co-patriots.

Yes, in my opinion, it is good that the title of the conference includes a reasonable, non-aggressive term such as “deliberations.” Within recent times we have already become so accustomed to the

language of slogans, ultimatums, invectives, that not only mirror the general attitude of a crisis era, but also exacerbate it. The current Ukrainian political situation is particularly denoted by the fact, that within its framework from very different people we usually today can hear one and the same talk: impatient, cruel, remiss of nuances, halftones and possibilities of retreat.

Unfortunately, given present circumstances, one can hardly expect to squeeze out of use this cruel confrontational talk – in a struggle whose obstinacy today only elevates, there exist own rules and own language. That which is within our realistic possibilities, amid this swirling of impatience – is to support at least some alternative, some territory for words that are not hasty, that are thoughtful. Therefore, I am grateful to the conference organizers for inviting us to contemplate. What I myself would like to propose here for the attention of my esteemed colleagues exactly what represents in itself an unpretentious approach – far removed from any category of contemplation, but rather brought on by current events in Ukraine.

I will try to speak sincerely. Numerous times during the last few months I tried to clarify for myself my own attitude towards the Maidan. I respect the convictions of those who stood there and I am saddened by remembering the innocent people who perished there.

It seems to me, that in addition to everything else, the Maidan manifests in it an unusually content-rich phenomenon not only in a strictly political but also in a socio-cultural sphere: especially it is worthwhile to note the unique manner in which this marvelous phenomenon combines in itself several intertwined realities: the current culture of opposition, elements of post-modern apparitions, a conscious restoration of Ukrainian antiquity and some deep motive of bearing witness to the truth, something understood

by all, which impelled simple Kyivans to bring to the central square of the city warm clothing and food, so that the poor meeting participants would not suffer from hunger and cold. In any case, this grandiose, overturning event in current Ukrainian life will require in time an objective and multi-angled research – a research which unquestionably has to include a certain critical element.

Therefore, after many times of attempting to think over from different points of view my perception of the Maidan, I always stumbled into that which stopped me – its, as it seemed to me, deep mono-logicalness, in spite of all the apparent diversity of voices that resounded there.

Of course, this mono-logicalness can be understood – the question lies in whether you are capable of perceiving it as your own internal ethos. I could not. Yet, I repeat once again: I do not insist here on my perception of concrete political realities. According to today's dramatic and precipitous series of events, you find yourself feeling more in the position of a pupil who should not skip any given lessons – terrifying lessons, although maybe, in some sort of very distant perspective, also hopeful. These lessons, I have to admit from personal experience, already tempt me to rethink a whole array of essential points; yet something in this still remains for me incomprehensible or simply absurd.

This or that aside, I still share the thought about the principled mono-logicalness of the Maidan. Even if there were proclaimed slogans and appeals which differed among each other – none of these slogans or appeals foresaw, in my opinion, the desire to hear the people with a really different view of reality.

I suppose that to a large degree this distinguishing feature was already embedded in the very concept of the Maidan, in its, Heidegger would say, “essential kernel of the matter.” A simple question which it would not be useless to consider in this relation:

how does the Maidan differ from “normal” political demonstrations – from those, to which people have gotten used to not only in the West but also in the East – demonstrations which engage an enormous mass of people and are usually stormy?

The answer to this question is also, in my opinion, very obvious. The very word – “demonstration” – comes, as it is known, from the Latin *demonstro*, which means “I show, explain, prove.” In itself, the position of the participant, invariably foresees involvement in certain interactions, a turning to your opponents co-patriots: see, we support such a position, we bring forth such and such arguments that should be taken into account, mind you!

Regarding the Maidan, it, as far as I understand, from the beginning did not foresee anything similar, rather it was about standing there in order “to stand” until the achievement of the set aim – mainly, until the discredited bankrupted authorities leave. Thus, instead of aiming for a discussion (interaction, even if it is polemical), there was immediately an attitude of violent struggle, on “pressuring” the enemy and in this or another way to force them to capitulate.

From here, it seems to me, is also the mentioned mono-logicalness of the Maidan: into the strategy of forceful pressure “others” do not fit; those who are not with us, are against us! This is the source of the known Maidan logic: people who do not share “our” convictions are simply fooled by the authorities, or have been bribed, or they watch “the wrong” TV channels, etc. However, the real problem of the presence in society of a significant number, or even a majority of those who regard and think otherwise from the active participants of the revolutionary events, does not simply disappear somewhere but continually becomes more radical – as it happens during any revolution, which sooner or later finds itself with the necessity of finding a common language with its society

and in the end does find such a language. Or does not find one: similarly to today's Ukrainian authorities, which, whatever the case, were conceived on the Maidan, and until today, have done much too little and behaved much too formally in addressing this pivotal issue.

I would not want to turn the conversation unto the tracks of banality. Any topic, taken in totality, is easily talked to death. About dialogue, a non-confrontational thinking over the last decades, only the lazy did not talk about this. Therefore, my attempts are in no way a superficial sermonizing: here, let's say, a dialogue is always better than a monologue, and let's be friends! Current circumstances testify as to how difficult and thorn-strewn can be the road, not even to an understanding, but simply to ending the shooting.

Undoubtedly, one has to consider the asymmetry of the positions, the asymmetry of the crimes, the collected walls of distrust and animosity – and with all this, so to say, from the inside to try one's utmost to protect the zones of potential agreement on values, an essential capability of holding a dialogue, a respectful human conversation about that which has pained everyone; that seems as our unchangeable resource for the future.

Last year at the UCU conference on March 1st dedicated to the issues of the ethics of civil virtues in the era of globalization, I talked about the practice of humanism. The opposition to an impudent authority is, unquestionably, an essential practice of compassion. Today, I would like to emphasize that, in view of such major evidence in the country of such deep differences, which we have today (and they probably exist even without encouragement from the outside), also one can behave compassionately – or otherwise.

As an example of "the other" inhumane behavior in similar circumstances we can take, particularly, the experience of the Civil

War – that big and terrible Civil War which rolled through the country almost a century ago and caused a million victims. Today, this experience, for understandable reasons, makes itself felt with a particular, evil cruelty. Until now, in the depths of our subconscious, lives the terrible memory of the inhuman cruelty of those times, of families once and forever separated by the line of fire of the armed opposition. What inspired families, brothers and sisters to stand on different sides of this fatal line?

In our days we, unfortunately, have reasons to look with fresh eyes on those, it would seem, unsuited for repetition events, to consider the questions which they evoke, within the context of our own tragic present.

During his time, Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote about "pre-judgments" or "pre-understanding" (*Vorverständnis*) that designate ahead our ability of interpretation, the way we constitute our knowledge. I would say that, similar to this, our principled attitude towards these or those civil events, often is thickly saturated by those pre-formed pre-choices and pre-judgments which are imbedded in the specificities of the *life course* of a person – not simply in the direct reception by a person of this or that ideological scheme. The civic choice of a person in a situation of "either-or" can be influenced by his/her whole life span – his/her unrepeatable experience, upbringing, anxieties, desires. Therefore, what does it mean to act compassionately (humanely) towards those of other convictions in a situation of conflict?

During the time of the just mentioned big and terrible Civil War of a century ago, it is known that those with other convictions were mostly simply killed. Today, we must expect, something at least complicates, halts our descent into such an apotheosis of inhumanity. And yet, any sort of thoughts, all the more concrete steps, directed at the recognition of the right of others to have their

own opinions and to defend their convictions, are difficult – and thereby, they are more urgent and valuable. After all and truly, the mere possibility of other convictions demands certain efforts from our side, directed at their recognition and understanding.

One has to take into account that in critical situations everyone as an integral person with one's own history determines one's own way of thinking and behavior – by listening to one's own conscience, own experience, own preference of values. Even in a crowd united by a common goal or by a common protest, they do not lose their meaning, the individual paths that brought each one to this – all the more they are significant and meaningful for society as a whole, whose level of the grouping remains principally different.

The uniqueness of these roads in itself cannot obviously be justified by those ideas and positions that people in fact choose as their own – in any case, we are responsible for our choices. But understanding other people is never useless, even if it does not justify them in our eyes. Learning how to accord what is due to the variety and independence of peoples' roads, we ourselves enter a difficult – often possibly an extremely unpleasant – road for us of broadening our own value horizons, adapting alternative methods of deliberating reality. In the end, it brings us closer to a more multidimensional and therefore a more adequate view of the situation in general.

It is important to note that in spite of all the unprecedented current dramatic divisions in the Ukrainian society, in their character they continue (and deepen to a really catastrophic scale) the well-fed – within the last two plus decades – tracks of an all-inclusive confrontation and animosity which among us has mostly boiled down to the essence of “democratic struggle.” However, real democracy foresees not only equal rights in defending opposite interests, but also the cultivation of unifying values. As also in the

times of Ancient Greece, in today's world, the quality of democracy is determined by the ability of the citizens to express an unbiased care for the common good. In other words, it is the power of its cultural foundation.

However, just as democracy is impossible without culture, so also culture, to an increasingly larger degree, needs real democracy – not only in relation to values, connected with the affirmation of democratic values, but also in its functioning, giving preference to democratic ways of explication of the variety of peoples' life preferences, experience, and relations. As a *value-oriented communication*, culture in such a connection with democracy is really able to become a peculiar nucleus of deep consolidation of society; one would like to expect that certain possibilities for movement in this direction are already today being conceived in tumultuous Ukraine.

Obviously, in today's circumstances someone can embrace the desire to transform all Ukrainian society into a kind of large Maidan, organized according to the principle of mono-logical solidarity. However, such a society, especially on the current homeland soil, would probably prove to be lacking vital capacity. Clearly there are more chances for an open society, capable of accepting individuals of different beliefs as well as the concept of heterodoxy, a society attentive to the variation of values and life roads which interweave through it. The intersection of these roads and values of the trajectory provides the community new points of support, principally important for surviving in the current – post-modern world. From this point of view, we should not only tolerate or respect the other-thinkers; we should learn how to be thankful to them for those new experiences and value spheres which they open for us, who-are-not-oriented-there, in our common existence.

How does the role of the Ukrainian intellectual community shape up in this context? Due to the tragic current events, when

we are dealing with overcoming the heavy heritage of a corrupted regime and the preservation of a nation, from the national intelligentsia usually one cannot expect a position “above the fight” and an unlimited tolerance. However, exactly this is our responsibility today: a support and defense of – why don’t we say practicing? – the spirit of humanness and sincerity, a spirit of non-confrontational good-willed discussion of urgent problems which create non-peace.

For each of such problems which today cinch us with the flames of hatred and pain – there is not only someone’s ill will (if it exists at all), but also the diversity of human roads sincere searches for truth and justice. This, obviously, does not decrease the importance of principled questions about good and evil, the righteous and the guilty. Yet every single human path is worth attention. And the more space we can free from the pathos of militant non-tolerance for patient, thoughtful, free of elements of obsession, conversation about the realistic complications of the situation in Ukraine, with gratitude to our partners in conversation for the fact that they are similar to us, – the more we will still have chances for the future.

It is known that at the basis of today’s militarization of the homeland consciousness lie the patriotic aspirations of Ukrainians – a feeling of insult and pain. Legally correct and at the same time tragic is that patriotism in us today occurs usually in its forceful apostasies – in the fervent desire to renew the territorial integrity of the country, to fight back those who are clawing at it, or simply to revenge. Such a picture of patriotism is, I repeat, in today’s circumstances, legally acceptable, perceived as important, but it is necessary that it does not close off the deeper perception of the homeland as an integral vital world, to which we directly belong and the existence of which we need to cultivate. Who, if not the

national intellectual community, should take care that the feeling of this direct complicity does not fade away and that we have the understanding that seclusion, hatred and unredeemed cultural ruptures can distort national identity and the face of the Motherland to a greater degree than even territorial loss?

During calmer times we all got used to the fact that talks about peace were easy and useless. In essence, they did not obligate anyone to anything. Today, to talk and to think about peace is difficult and complicated, perhaps also risky – however, in my opinion, extremely necessary. It is impossible to get rid of the impression that today’s universal escalation of militancy, no matter what were its concrete stimuli, grew on the substratum of a long-lasting disregard for peace and the values of peace, that over decades has gradually accumulated in our society – a disregard for peace, and therefore, the forbidden yet all the more fervent affiliation to force confrontation and flaunt force. For significant groups of people, especially youth, the word “peace” in the end has begun to mean nothing more than simply the absence of war, a kind of haven for weak souls, whereas it is war that one claims to be the real arena for initiative, courage and everything that decorates a person. Such an *aesthetics of war* appeared long before we slipped into realistic military action.

Yet, both today and whenever, it is worthwhile to remember: the end goal of every war, as the wise man Aristotle said, is peace. *Peace is the authentic field of human communication and creativity, the necessary condition for the realization of high values of human existence.* A non-peaceful, warring, full of animosity life of people and nations is not only bereaved of calmness, a pleasant comfort. The fact is, that it causes one to lose the possibility of realizing its essential goal, to show its real riches. It is exactly for this reason that we have to decide that we want to protect peace.

And one more thing: There are situations and times when the most important variation of human courage is the courage of goodness. There is nowhere to hide the truth: courage and the readiness for self-sacrifice we really received have used to connecting almost exclusively with the ethos of violent uprisings. However, during our days, humaneness, goodness and a peaceful attitude towards understanding, not infrequently in their own way, require no less courage than some soldier virtues.

As already mentioned, some principles are difficult not to beat to death by talking. To mention goodness and humanness too often, certainly, is not good. Yet, in my opinion such reminders as well as the general direction of deliberations and conversations on which they are based are justified today at least by the mere fact that they go against the ruling tendency of the times, prone to radicalism and forceful confrontations. To be reasonable, humane, and patient, even when it ejects you from the crowd of adherents, when it becomes “untimely” and dangerous, when for this you have to answer with your life – to that, of course no one can obligate us. Except – perhaps – our own conscience.

Language and Power: Reflections on Totalitarianism and Global Justice

Of the many essential characteristics that any reflection on global political theory must entail, namely, moral universalism, cultural relativism, universal principles of civil and political justice, global distributive justice, structures of international political systems, relations between distinct political establishments, and war, I have chosen to address the question of global justice. Of course all these are intrinsically related to one another and so deep reflection on any one inevitably sheds light on the others. My approach has a decidedly speculative slant, but I attempt throughout to say how such conjecture might be relevant to what is happening on the ground today in Ukraine. More specifically, I am interested in the relation of totalitarianism to global justice in the context of Pope Benedict XVI’s third and final encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (Love in Truth), an encyclical that Pope Francis has already made important references to, and, in particular, to Benedict’s urgent call in that encyclical for a “true world political authority.”¹ This paper was written over the last few months in Lebanon where I live and work and so my reflections have emerged in the context of watching *from afar* the dramatic events taking place in Ukraine, and from experiencing *up close* the equally dramatic and tragic events taking place in Syria, the daily repercussions of which are intense and dangerous for Lebanon.